

Citizens Voice Opposition To Proposed Tax Rate Hike

BY RAHN ADAMS

In light of a proposed 16½-cent property tax rate increase in the coming year, Brunswick County Commissioners Tuesday were urged to be "responsible stewards" of county taxpayers' money.

About 50 individuals attended the 1½-hour hearing Tuesday night at the Public Assembly Building in Bolivia. They came to discuss the county's proposed \$31.8 million budget, which includes a proposed 67-cent tax rate.

Of the 11 taxpayers who addressed the full board of commissioners, at least four speakers said they oppose the proposed tax rate hike. Remaining speakers either voiced their support of specific budget items or questioned the board about the budget process itself.

The most outspoken critic of the proposed budget and tax rate increase Tuesday was Ocean Isle Beach developer Odell Williamson, who is one of the county's largest property owners. According to Brunswick County Tax Department figures, Williamson paid more than \$151,000 in taxes last year on his \$30 million worth of property in Brunswick County.

In what Commission Chairman Grace Beasley later called a "rousing speech," Williamson spoke for about 20 minutes, admonishing commissioners to "produce a responsible budget."

"I do love Brunswick County . . . and I want to make sure we're going to exist," Williamson said. "We can't exist if we keep over-taxing people and driving them away."

He suggested that the proposed 16.5-cent rate increase was a scare tactic being used by the board to soften the shock of an eventual lesser increase in the final tax rate.

Williamson also spoke against the proposed implementation here of a one-percent real estate transfer tax, a measure which is used now in Dare and Currituck counties to offset the expense of development.

In presenting his budget to commissioners last month, County Manager John T. Smith suggested that they "explore" the tax as an additional source of revenue. The tax requires legislative approval for implementation.

Calling the tax a "fine shame," Williamson said Monday, "I hope I don't hear any more about that . . . Just because Dare's got it doesn't mean it's good for Brunswick."

He said he felt a real estate transfer tax would discourage the sale of property and stifle Brunswick's growth.

Another speaker, Eileen Kellagher of Long Beach, also was highly critical of what she termed "fiscal irresponsibility" on the part of commissioners.

"If we're in such dire straits, why do we keep giving taxpayers' money away," Ms. Kellagher asked, then later added, "You're bleeding us, and I wonder when it's going to stop."

She said the board should hold the public hearing when the budget is closer to being completed, instead of having the hearing at such an early stage in the budget process.

Among the taxpayers who spoke on specific budget items, Brunswick County NCAE President Janis Simmons urged commissioners to support pay supplement increases for teachers and teaching assistants in the county school system.

Smith said after the hearing that the proposed supplement increases amount to about \$80,000 and represent about a 50 percent increase. Simmons noted that the school personnel have not received supplement increases in the past six years.

Bernie Carlisle of Navassa Volunteer Fire Department also encouraged the board to continue their support of the county's fire departments and rescue squads. "We need everything we can get this year," Carlisle said.

Jim Hankins, who is president of the West Brunswick High School Boosters Club, asked that commissioners approve \$50,000 allocations in the school board's budget for improvements to athletic facilities at each of the county's three high schools. After the hearing, Hankins explained that the funds would be used to match monies raised by the individual schools.

Also, County Parks and Recreation Board members Morry Watkins and Foxy Howard expressed support for bringing a minor league baseball team to Brunswick County through construction of a 4,000-seat stadium at

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Never Say Die

Gary Galloway of Varnamtown pulls with all his might as lead man on the Lockwood Folly Seafood tug-of-war team, which eventually lost this grueling final match to the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department

during Saturday's Brunswick Islands Beach Festival. The story and more photos are inside this issue.

Lawmen Seize \$2.2 Million In Marijuana Through Air Search

BY RAHN ADAMS

State and local lawmen got an early start on this year's marijuana harvest by seizing almost 1,400 plants in northern Brunswick County last week.

The marijuana, with an estimated street value at maturity of more than \$2.2 million, was found last Wednesday in the Maco area during a two-day air search that covered a major portion of the county, according to Brunswick County Sheriff John C. Davis.

No arrests were made in connection with the operation. "All of the patches were in remote areas," Davis said. "The only way (to make an arrest) would be to catch somebody going to them."

Last Wednesday's marijuana find, which was Brunswick's largest one-day seizure in the past 10 years, came a day after lawmen searched middle and southern sections of the

county with no success, Davis said.

"We flew both days and didn't find anything on Tuesday," Davis said. "I think we're kind of early . . . We'll get the plane again, and keep trying it."

Early or not, the two-day effort netted more marijuana plants than were seized during each of the past two years. The sheriff's department found only 388 plants in 1987 and about 1,100 in 1986.

Last year, the SBI spotter plane was used here for only two days—once in July and once in August. Poor weather conditions hampered both operations.

According to a sheriff's department report on last week's searches, 1,383 plants—ranging in height from two inches to two feet—were found in six separate plots located off N.C. 87.

The plane flew from treetop level to an altitude of about 1,200 feet while the SBI spotter directed ground

teams to the marijuana patches. The ground teams consisted of two SBI agents and 15 members of the sheriff's department.

Detective Sgt. David Crocker said the May 31 search included the Southport, Supply, Shallotte, South Brunswick Islands and Ash areas. Although no plants were found, officers did locate plant beds that they suspect are intended for marijuana growing, he said.

According to the SBI, lawmen across the state seized 89,273 marijuana plants last year. A total of 1,611 plots were found in 94 of the state's 100 counties.

Wilkes County was the top producer last year with 11,132 plants in 59 plots. Bladen ranked second with 6,690 plants in 12 plots.

The SBI estimates the street value of a mature marijuana plant at \$1,600.

Shallotte Proposes Three-Cent Tax Hike

BY DOUG RUTTER

A three-cent tax hike and large-scale expansion of the wastewater treatment plant are included in next year's proposed \$1.1 million budget for the Town of Shallotte.

In the tentative budget, which was presented to town board members last week, the tax rate would increase from 44 cents to 47 cents per \$100 of property valuation. With an estimated valuation of \$56.3 million and collection rate of 95 percent, the town expects to collect \$251,332 in taxes.

If approved, the tax hike would be the first since the county underwent a property revaluation three years ago.

The town board was to have held a budget workshop Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. in town hall. A budget hearing will be held at the next regular meeting, June 15 at 7:30 p.m.

The major expenditure included in next year's proposed budget is

\$118,950 for improvements of water and sewer service. This represents more than 10 percent of the total budget and will be used mainly for expansion of the wastewater treatment plant.

Other large appropriations include \$65,000 for a fire truck and \$192,790 in town employee wages. The proposed increase in salaries is \$24,760, representing a four percent cost-of-living increase and merit bonuses for several town employees.

Also in the tentative budget, the town has appropriated \$75,000 for trash pickup instead of the \$60,000 it currently pays. This 20 percent projected increase is mainly the result of town growth.

The proposed budget also includes a \$10,000 appropriation for administrative costs of the volunteer fire department, \$5,500 for the West Brunswick Branch Library, \$1,000 for the South Brunswick Islands Chamber of Commerce and \$1,000 for

the Shallotte Volunteer Rescue Squad.

General fund revenues are expected to increase almost \$140,000 next fiscal year to \$597,579. This is primarily due to the increase in taxes, which should bring an extra \$30,000 to the town; inclusion, for the first time, of the fire department's \$40,000 in savings and certificates of deposit in the budget, and an additional \$25,000 in county revenues.

In the water and sewer fund, revenues are expected to increase nearly \$150,000 next fiscal year to \$511,465. In addition to \$118,950 from the capital reserve fund, extra revenues are also anticipated from two other sources.

Sales tax revenues are expected to be \$27,000, an increase of \$15,000 over the current fiscal year, while water charges should bring in \$278,104 in the 1988-89 fiscal year for an additional \$30,000. The proposed budget reflects no change in water or sewer rates.

County Officials Consider Benefit Of Bringing Pro Team To Brunswick

BY RAHN ADAMS

Although there was some confusion last week over how and when the matter will be decided, Brunswick County Commissioners began considering a proposal to build a minor league baseball stadium in Leland—a \$500,000 facility which would house a franchise that originally had its sights set on Wilmington.

However, county officials appeared to be leaning against the proposal last week, due to the expense of the stadium and its questionable economic benefits to Brunswick County.

"I've got to look at it from the business standpoint," said Commissioner Chris Chappell. "I'm scared Wilmington is going to get the impact, and we're going to get the stadium."

Representatives of a company called United Baseball met with commissioners last Wednesday in Bolivia, to discuss locating a South Atlantic League Class-A expansion team at the new Northwest Township District Park off U.S. 74-76. League President John Moss of Kings Mountain also was present for the 1½-hour meeting. Benny Ludlum was the only commissioner absent.

Moss explained that the South Atlantic League is expanding from 12 to 14 baseball teams next season. The league currently has four teams in North Carolina—Asheville, Fayetteville, Gastonia and Greensboro—and five in South Carolina—Charleston, Columbia, Myrtle Beach, Spartanburg and Sumter. League officials want to locate the two expansion teams in North Carolina and Georgia, he said.

'I'm scared Wilmington is going to get the (economic) impact, and we're going to get the stadium.'

Chris Chappell
District 1 Commissioner

Benefits Outlined

While emphasizing a minor league baseball team's value in providing family entertainment, Moss said a franchise in Brunswick County would also have an estimated \$4½ million impact on the community as an "industrial, corporate citizen."

He cited the economic worth of having the team's 25 players live in the area and having the league's 13 other teams visit the area for the

local club's 70 home games. Another substantial benefit would be major league subsidies for goods and services such as food and travel.

Dr. Eric Margenau of New York, N.Y., and Alan Lewis of Los Angeles, Calif., whose United Baseball owns franchises in South Bend, Ind., and Watertown, N.Y., told commissioners that a team here would bring jobs, sales tax revenue and new businesses to the county.

"We feel that there are tremendous economic spin-offs that result from bringing a minor league team to a community," Margenau said, noting that stores, restaurants and motels have "sprung up" near South Bend's new stadium.

Margenau also pointed out that the county-owned stadium could be used to hold other money-making events such as concerts and professional

wrestling. A joint commission would be set up to oversee scheduling of special events, he said.

Costs Projected

Margenau said construction of a 4,000-seat stadium would cost from \$500,000 to \$700,000. That expense, however, could be reduced since the county already owns the 35-acre district park site and since Brunswick County Parks and Recreation could handle part of the construction work.

Parks and Recreation Board member Foxy Howard noted that considerable funds already have been allocated for the park, which is now under construction. But Parks and Recreation Director Bobby Jones said after the meeting that the \$300,000 now being used for the park would not reduce the stadium cost estimate. A concrete stadium with

dugouts and dressing room facilities would cost about \$100 per seat, Jones estimated.

Responding to commissioners' questions, Margenau speculated that the franchise would pay the county from \$15,000 to \$60,000 per year to lease the stadium, depending on whether the lease agreement was based on a flat fee or on a percentage of profits. He admitted, though, that the county probably would not recover its investment through the rent paid by the team.

But the franchise representatives, Moss and local recreation officials countered that the team and stadium would offer other less tangible benefits, such as instilling community pride in young athletes and creating incentive for future commercial growth in the Leland area.

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